

## 7/24/2011 TOP TEN TEACHINGS OF PAUL: 7 - "Attacked, But Not Defeated"

Key Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12; also James 1:2-6, 12

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Surprise attacks are never any fun and they are often devastating. The early Sunday morning attack in 1941 of a key naval base in the Pacific Theater was terribly destructive and the result was our country was thrown into World War II with two major fronts: Europe and the Pacific. Now the name Pearl Harbor is synonymous with surprise attack.

The early Sunday morning attack on a Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon in 1983 made us all realize that we had enemies who were not nation-states. We discovered terrorism was just as devastating yet, more difficult to prepare for. The group, "Islamic Jihad" took the credit for planning and carrying out that attack.

There have been many other surprise attacks in history, but for us the most devastating was on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Commercial airplanes were the weapons, innocent citizens were the victims, and symbolic buildings were the targets.

In each of these cases, we were attacked, but not defeated. We rose up collectively as a nation, we came together and we responded with courage, strength and resolve.

We also suffer surprise attacks in our personal lives. Friends say things that are unkind, co-workers blame us for company problems or throw us under the bus when talking to the boss. And sometimes spouses even surprise us by revealing long held plans to leave, or by striking us, or by taking our money and means of support.

These attacks happen in real life. They may not be normal but they are regular, and almost every single person has experienced at least one.

In one congregation I served, I thought that things were going along smoothly. The church was progressing, financial support was sufficient, ministries were growing. But one member, whom I thought was a friend of mine, wrote a painful and accusatory letter to the Staff-Parish Relations Committee chair, and though the accusations were unfounded, it ultimately led to my leaving that church. It was so painful, so surprising, so inaccurate, so personal, that for a long while I did not recover. I was both devastated and defeated. I virtually gave up. It took me a full year to come to my sense and get back on the horse.

Well, despite all the pain I've experienced in my life, despite all the challenges, difficulties and betrayals you may have experienced in your life; nothing we have gone through compares to the regular persecution that Paul endured in his ministry. Remember that Christianity was viewed as a subversive sect. Christianity called for and encouraged many changes in Roman society. Things that had been generally accepted as normal, even if they were immoral, unethical and unkind were unacceptable to Christians. The governors of territories, the officers of the Roman Army, and caesar himself – all stood against the Christians in a variety of forms. Since Paul was a leader and strong advocate of the Christian faith and lifestyle, he was a regular target for punishment, persecution, torture and imprisonment. He shared this little synopsis of his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11: **Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys,**

**in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.**

Gratefully, we have not had to suffer as much or as consistently as Paul, even if we are in difficult situations, or have been hurt badly.

Yet Paul reflects upon his struggles with an amazingly victorious tone. He writes to encourage the Corinthians and to encourage us. The central verses of this week's key passage give us surprising hope. He wrote in verses 8 and 9: **We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.** You and I have been slandered, but not discredited; surprised by harm, but not undone; we've faced setbacks, but did not lose hope; and we've been attacked, but we are not defeated.

Paul puts this into theological terms that make sense for us. He continued in the next verses, **We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that HIS LIFE may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.**

You and I go through life dealing with one struggle after another. I don't mean it is constant, but we go through chapters of our lives where some chapters are difficult and painful, and others are happy or at least fairly normal and calm. We experience both other people's meanness and we face illnesses, financial challenges, occupational disillusionment, and relationship upheavals. And sometimes our worst experiences are when these devastations affect our children, perhaps more so than when they hit us.

Initially we may ask, where is God when I am suffering? What is God doing about this problem of mine? The answer is that God is with us. He is always with us. He sustains us and holds us especially during the period we are in shock and have just learned of our difficulty. But God does more than just hold us and comfort us. God is always at work to bring healing and restoration, to create new opportunities, and to help us find escape routes. But God also wants us to

- 1) trust him to see us through;
- 2) learn something as we go through the experience;
- 3) be open to new and perhaps surprising solutions that we might not have thought of on our own;  
and
- 4) make sure we acknowledge that God is the one who saw us through and got us out.

Many times when we are going through a period of difficulty or hardship we too quickly give up on God, because he did not resolve our problem overnight. We then decide to take matters into our own hands. But when we do that, we often

- 1) make decisions that we later regret;
- 2) make decisions that we cannot later undo; and
- 3) do things to make our situation more difficult or last longer.

We must keep the faith. We must trust God for the long haul. God is trustworthy. God is dependable.

God does actually love us and care about every detail of our lives. So that when we are attacked, when we face a real trial or difficulty, we can be confident that God will see us through.

Early in the morning on October 31, 2003 while practicing her surfing off the coast of Kauai, Bethany Hamilton was just drifting and easily paddling in the surf. Drawn by a number of sea turtles swimming in the area a 14-foot tiger shark tore off her left arm just below the shoulder. Before they could get her to shore and put a tourniquet around the stump of her arm, she lost 60% of her blood. She was rushed to a nearby hospital and was taken directly into surgery, occupying the very OR that her father was supposed to use for a knee-replacement surgery.

The amazing thing about Bethany's story is her and her families' strong faith in God, and her determination to get back on a surfboard, and to compete. She was back in the water teaching herself to swim with one arm and getting back up on her surfboard in less than one month. The incident caused her to rely more fully upon God, and to be more fierce in her pursuit of her dream to surf competitively. She went on to win the National Scholastic Championship, and after turning pro, she came in second in a recent national tournament, competing against the world's best female surfers.

She wrote a biography describing the shark attack, her recovery and her faith in her book, *Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board* (ISBN 0-7434-9922-0). The book was made into a feature film, that was released just recently and shown in theaters everywhere.

She has lived out what Paul spoke of. And in many ways you and I have done so too. We didn't get here unscathed. But sometimes when we are going through a crisis of one kind or another, we forget what a powerful resource our faith can be. That is why we should almost memorize this one line from today's key passage: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."

Life is about difficulty. The more trials we have the more wise and mature we become. Yes, we may have many wounds and scars but they, in part, make us who we are. The other passage I had read today is written by Jesus' brother, James. He encourages his readers, and us, by saying: **Consider it pure joy, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**

Perseverance is a necessary ingredient if we are survive and grow. Yes, we can give up. Yes, we can give in. Yes, we can just throw up our hands and say "oh well." But God wants us to be strong, to trust in him, to work hard, and to persevere even in the face of opposition.

In 1993, at it's annual ESPY awards, Coach Jimmy Valvano was given a special lifetime achievement award. He was suffering from cancer and it was terminal. In partnership with ESPN, he formed The V Foundation to raise funds for research to find a cure for cancer. In his acceptance speech he concluded by saying that in life, in sports, in everything, "do not give up, don't ever give up." And that has become the slogan of his foundation.

That's the message of Paul. This is the lesson of this passage. Do not give up, don't ever give up. God is with us, and until the day we die, God is not finished with us yet. Amen.